

Beef Eating in the Ancient Tamizhagam

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Introduction: Eating of fish, mutton, beef, venison, meat in general is found in many references in the ancient Tamil literature, hereinafter mentioned as “Sangam literature” for convenience¹. Though, emphasis has been given for food produced with the combination of water and earth and thus, rice eating or vegetarian food², it is evident that a differentiation between vegetarian and non-vegetarian food was not made in those days. Surprisingly, there have been many references which reveal about mixing of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food together and taking by the ancient Tamils³. This again goes to prove that religious restriction was not there or religion did not play any role in the food habits.

Though, scholars⁴ previously discussed about cattle-raiding / lifting vividly and compared with “*gogharana*” of Vedic / Sanskrit literature, the subject of beef eating has not been discussed by them. Definitely, they were perplexed by observing the contradictory habit of beef-eating by the so-called “cattle-protectors”. They have dealt with the subject on the basis of so called “*Brahmanical interpretation*” or “*Sanskritic interpretation*” and perhaps, thus totally missed the significance or prevalence of beef-eating in the supposedly “Aryanized” Tamil / Dravidian society.

The transition from beef-eating to cow deification leading to banning of the former must have taken place during the complete change over of the social factors with the strong religious and political conditions and compulsions, that too, within a short period, as it could not have been implemented immediately. Then, the society should have been conducive and favourable enough to accept such change.

Man has every right to eat anything. He can eat beef, mutton, pork, fish, venison or meat of any animal or bird. If he wants, he can eat man also, as history is replete with many such examples. During food shortage, the concept of “survival of the fittest” works faithfully according to the principles of natural selection and evolution. Then, when he must have shunned a particular flesh for eating? Why he should have stopped eating man at a particular time? Why vegetarianism should be advocated against non-vegetarianism? The answers to these questions should be found only in the cultured, refined, advanced and civilized society. When the ancient Tamils stopped beef-eating, shunned meat and advocated vegetarianism, definitely such exigency could have arisen due to well planned design to change.

Different words used for meat: Many words have been used in the literature to denote meat of different varieties⁵. They are Un (meat), Thu, Thasai (flesh), Thadi, Ninam (fat), Pulal (dried meat with smell / dried salt-fish), Vidakkudai, Muri (removed flesh) characteristically.

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References found about Beef-eating: The specific references found in the Sangam literature about beef-eating are mentioned and discussed.

Mazhavar ate the flesh of a fatty cow in the palai (desert) region (Agam.129:12).

The place where Mazhavar killed a calf and ate its flesh was filled with the bad smell (pulal visum) of meat, again in the palai region (Agam.249:12-13).

A fatty cow was sacrificed at the bottom of a neem tree where a God resided, its blood sprinkled and then its flesh cooked by the Mazhavar – Vetchi virar – warriors who captured cows during their raids from the depredators – Karandai, again in the palai region (Agam.309:1-5).

A Panan, with the instrument “Tannumai” killed a calf, stripped off and ate its flesh, in the marudha region (Nat.310.9). As the instrument is mentioned along with his act of killing a calf, it may be implied that the leather used for it might be that of a calf. Tannumai is a leather instrument, used to beat to drive away cattle lifter and Aralai kalavar or to warn about their presence and attack. Here, the irony is the “Tannumai” made of calf-leather is to be used to drive away the “cattle-lifters”, though, the “Tannumai”-player happened to be – not only a beef-eater, but also not a “cattle-protector”. Therefore, from the above references, Mazhavar, Aralai kalvar, Panar resorted to beef-eating.

Leather usage and Cattle-killing: Leather usage implies obtaining such leather from the dead or killed cattle. References are there how leather was obtained after the death of bull / ox. Agananuru and Purananuru⁶ refer to it: In a bull fight, the victorious bull is taken and its leather is used for the manufacture of Royal drum / tabour, implying the skin of fallen bull / or ox after killing is used for the purpose mentioned and the flesh for eating. Accordingly, it is evident that bull / ox was killed wantonly for the purpose mentioned. But, again there was no evidence for killing a cow in the context.

The references found about the usage of such leather for drums / tabours are as follows:

- ⇔ The skin of an Ox, which was without any blemish and not used in any other work, was used to cover the drum (Madu.732-733).
- ⇔ The skin of a beautiful Ox, which daringly killed a tiger, was selected for covering the drum (Agam.334).
- ⇔ Two Bulls were selected and made them to fight. Of which, the winner's skin was used for the drum (Puram.288).

Why Beef should be eaten? Eating of flesh of cow or for that matter any animal, that too raw with blood, shows the status of the evolutionary man at lower pedestal determined by archaeological factors. Then, justification of beef-eating based on the following arguments put forward by advanced, civilized and scientific man do not hold water:

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1. Beef is nutritious, cheaper, easily available, and digestible – cow-protection can thus be controlled effectively. Cows are bred and protected for their value.
2. Scientific and rational – though sanctioned in a particular religion etc., there is no meaning in continuance of keeping the aged cattle.

Therefore, if the ancient Tamils were eating beef, mutton, meat, fish etc., singing Sangam poems, then, their status should be carefully assessed. Again, it may be noted that beef-eating in such an advanced, civilized and refined state would not deprive their status.

How were cows available for killing? Was there any organized cow killing during Sangam period for beef-eating with abattoirs? The answer is definitely not, as we do not come across breeding of cows, capturing cows of others – using, buying cows from others for the purpose, milking till they last and then killing for beef and leather. The act of Mazhavar / Kalvar / Panar shows their barbaric, uncivilized and uncultured nature, as there are references, where they used to kill travelers also irrespective of their status and hide their bodies covering⁷. Again, it is not specifically mentioned in the literature as to whether they were keeping the human bodies for concealing from others to hide their inhuman crime or for other purposes to suspect cannibalism. Then, one cannot become wild, when it was prevalent in the golden age of Sangam literature or “Aryans” cannot be blamed for.

If the “Aryanization” had been complete and total or the influence of Jains and Buddhists was so predominant, then, the ancient Tamil literature should not have given a mosaic food habit of the Tamils. Archaeological evidences of megalithic culture⁸, which have been compared with the Sangam, period as depicted by the literature itself give such mosaic picture with contradicting food habits. The main problem is due to the clear mixing up of poems together belonging to different periods under the category of “Sangam literature” restricted it to c.500 BCE to 500 CE or 300 BCE to 300 CE. Therefore, the issue should be analyzed without racial and linguistic bias, prejudice and bigotry.

Beef-eating and Priests: Whether the “priestly class” of the Sangam society ate beef? Did “Brahmans / Brahmins” stop meat-eating to project themselves as superior to ahimsa preaching Jains? These are the interesting and crucial questions to be covered in the context.

The presence of a priestly class in a society should be a normal indicator for an established religion or popular religion acceptable to the majority of people, so their influence could create an impact on the fellow members. However, such a priestly class of the Sangam society should only be “Brahmans / Brahmins” as has been popularly believed is not supported by the Sangam literature, as no “Brahman / Brahmin” word is found.

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Though, P. T. Srinivasa Iyengar discussed about “Brahmans” eating meat quoting Kapilar, but he was silent about his reference about rice-eating (Puram.337:13-15). Kapilar addresses to a Chera king, “Your hands have become hard due to warfare and giving alms to poets, whereas, the hands of poets have become soft, as they used to sing about you and eat smelling meat, seasonings of food, curry and boiled with rice with meat” (Puram.14:12-14). Again, at another place, when he leaves Parambunadu, he praises it, “You used to provide us opened jars filled with liquor, slayed rams, boiled rice and curry with friendship. Now, as Pari was dead, I am going away from you(Puram.113:1-3). Taking these references, P. T. Srinivasa Iyengar interprets that Kapilar himself as desiring them as reward of his poems. However, none has pointed out significantly that they ate beef also. The famous and favourable argument put forward by some scholars is that the meat / beef-eating Brahmans suddenly stopped it to promote cow-protection to project themselves to superior to ahimsa-preaching Jains or they had to fight the atheistic Jains and Buddhists were preaching and practicing non-violence, they should and could not have been so cruel to meat / beef eating, so that the Brahmans could found an ingenuous trick to take over them.

The glaring example of Kalabras and their attitude towards Tamils, in spite of their Jaina or Buddhist religious affiliation is a clear mark of contradiction. So also the contradicting position of the meat eating Buddhists, as they were preaching love, ahimsa etc., at one side and eating meat at another side. Definitely, this must have created a strong impression upon the minds of the men and women of Sangam society. If we take the example of Kapilar, it can be said that only certain Parppar ate meat, but not all Parppar. Moreover, nothing is mentioned to prove that Andanar, Aruthozhilalar, Aravor, Maraiyavar, Muppirinulor, Pusurar, Vedhiyar, Mudhalvar, Kuravar and other classes of Sangam society, who are also considered as “Brahmans / Brahmins” ate meat. As the Vela Parppar were cutting conch shells and manufacturing bangles, there might have been some Parppar eating meat as referred to by Kapilar.

Incidentally, the conch-shell bangle manufacture involves removal of fleshy material from inside, cleaning it and then used for further processing. A Brahman by nature might not be accustomed to do such undesirable act. Therefore, a question arises as to whether he himself does such work or the Vela-Parppan group received cleaned conch-shells for cutting, sawing, polishing and painting completing the process of manufacture.

Therefore, as far as Tamizhagam is concerned, the argument that “Brahmans / Brahmins” ate beef or stopped beef eating to browbeat Jains and Buddhists in their maneuvers has no basis at all, as nothing is mentioned in the Sangam literature. The failure of Jainism and Buddhism in Tamizhagam proves the impossibility of co-existence of contradictory precept, preaching and practices. Therefore, if beef-eating Brahmins were performing yagnas or cow were sacrificed during yagnas, definitely, they would have been opposed by the public for their contradiction or totally wiped out from the society or they would not have been recognized and respected. What had happened to Jains and Buddhists

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should have happened to them also. But, that the atheist groups dwindled down proves the minimal acceptance of such contradicting practices. If general public had hated anything against their culture, tradition and heritage, definitely, such practices could not have been imposed on them, whether such method of imposition was carried out overtly or covertly with authority or submission.

When Cow was deified? The cow protecting communities were living in the Mullai region of the Sangam geography, Mayon (the Black one) or Tirumal (sacred mountain, ancient mountain, Black) or Nediyan (the Lengthy / Tall One, Great) was their God, who is identified with Vishnu or Krishna. Though, Indra Vizha (festival of Indra, the god of Marudha nilam) is mentioned, deification of cow or festival of cows is not found. Neither he nor Mayon is implied as “Govindan or “Gopalan” (= protector or saviour of cows). As Krishna stopped the celebration of festival meant for Indra, after his victory over him and advised their followers to celebrate the same in the his name, there should have been some “Vizha” commemorating him, but we do not find any festival meant for Mayon, except “Tainniradal” by women. The name “Kannan” equivalent to of “Krishna” has been so popular in the literature, as even pots have it as suffixes. As he is the god of mullai region, automatically, the cow should have also received due respect theologically. As Pongal festival has closely been associated with cow deification and the culture of the ancient Tamils, it is implied that such deification of cow might have begun, as supported by the Neolithic / megalithic cattle keepers, periodical burning of cow-pans etc. however, deification of cow is also not found in the Sangam literature, in spite of many references about cow and cattle-raidings and this, again clearly proves the independent food habit of the ancient Tamils or non-infiltration of the so called “Aryan influence” or principles of the Tamil society.

The different words used for cow in the literature are – a, an, aninam, aniral, avinam, anirai etc. The Vedic names for cow are aghnya, ahi, aditi etc. In fact, they mean aghnya = not to be killed, ahi = not to be slaughtered, aditi = not to be cut into pieces. Therefore, it is evident, that the Tamil words used to denote cow also started to convey such meaning and thus, they were to be protected by Kings and others.

Protectors of Cows: Though, Kovalar, Idaiyar, Kongar, Ayar, Andar and other communities specifically lived depending upon cattle with Mayon as their God, it could not prevent Mazhavar / aralai kalvar of Palai from preventing killing of cows and beef-eating, even though, they were also supposedly worshipping Kotravai, who is nothing but sister-in-law of Mayon, according to the interpretation of the commoners. On the other hand, the cattle lifters were Kalvar, Mazhavar, Panar, Maravar and Vadugar. And all were part of the Sangam society and considered “Dravidians”. But, how then certain groups of “Dravidians” had been “cow-slaughterers” and some others “Cow-protectors” is not known.

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Protection of Cows: the emphasis is given in the literature for the protection of cows is also noted⁹. Netrimaiyar (Velalar by caste), a Tamil poet records that cows having the character of weak should be protected, by grouping such categories – cow, women and the sick. Another poet, Alattur Kizhar (Vellalar) notes that the crime of cutting off of a udder of a cow tops the list of heinous crimes committed by anybody. Then comes the destruction of foetus of pregnant ladies and crime committed against “kuravar”, implying priestly class. Tiruvalluvar¹⁰ also emphasizes in more or less in the same way. He says that there is redemption for any sin / crime committed against good act, but not against ingratitude. Again in another place, he points out that if ruler does not rule or protect properly, the fruits of cows would decrease and those with six duties (Arutozhilalatr) forget their books / scriptures. Therefore, it is evident that the respect for cows and its protection got importance in the Sangam society. Moreover, another important point should be noted is that why Velalar should advocate cow protection, while Anthanar / Parppar poet Kapilar was aping for meat, if not for beef. Tiruvalluvar is quoted here, as he has been totally against flesh-eating of anykind.

Yagnas and Cows: Vedic infiltration has been detected at many places, because of the performance of yagna by the Tamil kings and so on by the “Dravian” scholas. Palyagasalai Mudhukudimi Peruvazhudhiyan, as his name connotes a Pandya King, performer of many yagnas with lengthy tuft, but not in a poem referring to his yagnas records about the cow sacrifice. **Rasasuyam** was also performed by a Chola King by earning name “Rasasuyam Vettiya Perungilli”. But, no reference of sacrifice of “horse” in Rasasuyam is there, though goat was sacrificed repeatedly by Velan to please Murugu / Muruga / Murugan during Veriyadal. If beef-eating was so intimately connected with or mandatory for yagnas, then, definitely, it should have been mentioned to record its performance.

Sanction and Prohibition of Beef: Sanction or prohibition of eating anything starts from the association of it with God, Prophet or religion itself. Ample examples can be seen in the world religious literature about such evolution as pointed out by Frazer, Blavatsky and others. Depending upon myth, theology and social necessity, such evolution mostly embraces economic factors. That is why economic or social necessity gets sanctified with religious order or political dominance with authority enforced. So also prohibition starts for producing counter factors. Thus, what is sanctioned in one religion is prohibited in another religion and vice versa. Thus, beef-eating, pork-eating, carrion-flesh eating, fish eating etc., are sanctioned and prohibited in the world religions.

Beef eating and yagna practices were definitely prevalent among the ancient Tamils. Therefore, if combination of such could have been effected, had they been really any such affinity between and necessity for them. Even, the invading, alien culture imposing or “dominating Aryans” could have manipulated it seizing the wonderful prevailing opportunity. But, neither the Aralai kalvar stopped their beef-eating without yagnas nor the “Aryanized kings” performed yagnas killing cows. Here, the “Aryan-Dravidian” interpretation falls down completely.

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Chronological Puzzles: Moreover., the Jaina and Buddhist infiltration could have been taken place during 3rd century BCE. But, their scholarly works, mostly covered under Padinemozhikanakku, which strongly advocate non-abstinence from meat, praise of vegetarianism etc., are dated to 1st to 8th cent. CE. Therefore, if the priestly class was already sacrificing cows in the yasnas and eating beef, why they should have started to write against it in later period? Why their persecution should start in the 8th cent. CE, when they were already supporting vegetarianism, non-eating of meat etc?

It is also intriguing to note the Neolithic and megalithic Tamils with Iron technology were composing Sangam literature and leading refined, cultured and advanced social life as depicted in the literature itself, but historians dub them as living in “barbaric condition” or in a “tribal state” without any “state formation”.

Archaeological Evidences: There are many archaeological evidences found at Neolithic and megalithic burials prove the mixed food habit of the ancient Tamils¹¹. Lower Neolithic people were leading pastoral life heavily depending upon cattle and agriculture, tallying with the depiction of mullai region. Upper Neolithic people were practicing mixed farming, a combination of fishing (hooks found), hunting (different hunting implements, charred bone showing roasting of meat, cut marks on the bones proving the extraction of marrow from them etc) and gathering (deer, squirrel, tortoise, udumbu = *gunda lacerta ignana* etc), domestication of animals (cattle, sheep, pigs, fowls – Gaudhar = partridge, kadai = quail etc) and agriculture (growing rice, ragi, maize, millets, horse gram etc).

The nature of settled life led is proved by the megalithic evidences. Food habits show more or less the same pattern as that of Neolithic culture with more refined implements. Use of ferrous and non-ferrous technology was however prevalent with both the cultures. As the archaeological evidences of both cultures overlap or exhibit almost similar structure and carbon datings have extremities of c.3000 to 300 BCE, a thorough study in consonance with literary study may reveal further interesting details about the Sangam society.

Conclusion: Based on the above discussion, the following conclusions are arrived at:

- ✧ Sangam society as depicted in the Sangam literature adapted and adopted mixed food habit.
- ✧ Beef-eating was prevalent in the Sangam period without any religious compulsion or restriction.
- ✧ Aralai kalver / Mazhavar / Panar etc., ate beef. Some of the Parppar might have eaten meat, but not beef and such Parppar did not belong to priestly class or engaged in the performance of yasnas.

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- ⇒ Yagnas were performed, but no cow, horse or any animal was sacrificed.
- ⇒ Mostly goat and cock were sacrificed during veriyadal and other occasions and cow in few occasions to please nature, but such sacrificial rites cannot be considered yagnas. Similarly, “Kala velvi”, the so called yagnas conducted at the battle fields as depicted by the poets, is nothing to do with “velvi”.
- ⇒ Chronologically, nothing could be specifically mentioned about the starting and introduction of beef-eating in the Tamizhagam based on the evidence of religion and theology.
- ⇒ Racial and linguistic interpretation does not help to find facts about the Sangam society.
- ⇒ The exact penetration of “Krishna myth” and worship of cow as “Goddess” into the minds of the ancient Tamils must have taken place, if Mayon is a “Black Dravidian God”, since time immemorial based on the literary evidence.

Notes and References

1. In Pattuppattu and Ettuttogai, as there have been hundreds of references about the topic and sub-topics dealt with in this paper, for the sake of convenience and space constraint only selected poem references are given.

Venison = meat of deer (Puram.33: 1-6; 152.26).

Fork (Puram.177:12-16; 379:8; Porunatru.343-345; Malai.175-177).

Elephant (Agam.106:10).

Tortoise (Puram.212:3).

Porcupine (Malai.176).

Fowl (Puram.320:11; 324:2).

2. Puram. 18: 19-24; 186:1.

3. Mixing of vegetarian and non-vegetarian food together:

Puram. 14:13 - Meat with rice and vegetable curry.

Venison with butter – 33:1-6

Milk with the flesh of deer – 168:12-16

Chicken, bird and fish with millet – 320:10-11.

Mutton with rice – 366:16-18

Pork roasted in ghee and mixed with rice 379:8-10.

Meat with rice mixed with milk, jaggery etc – 381:1-3.

Roasted meat in ghee mixed with rice – 382: 8-10.

Meat with rice – 391:3-6.

Rabbit meat with old rice – 395: 3-5.

Flesh of rabbit with rice – 396:12-13.

Venison with rice – 398: 13-14,

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Meat, fish with fruits – 399:1-6.

Malai. 422-425; 563-566.

Agam. 60:3-6.

Natri.41:8; 45”6; 60:6; 281:6.

4. P. T. Srinivasa Iyengar, ***History of Tamils from the Earliest times to 600 A. D.***, C. Coomarasamy Naidu & Sons, Madras, 1929, Madras.

He, while discussing about meat-eating by Brahmans, wonders as to when and why South Indian Brahmanas (part of ancient Tamil society) gave up meat-eating being an interesting problem. He concludes that with the rise of Bakti cult and teaching of Jainas, they gave up meat = eating to become first teachers of Vaishnava and Saiva Agamas (pp.121-122). Though he quotes Kapilar to prove that Brahmans ate meat, he has not specifically noted that they ate beef also. In fact, Kailar talks about rice eating in a poem (Puram 337:14).

N. Subramaniam, ***Sangam Polity***, Ennes Publications, Madurai, 1980.

M. G. S. Narayanan, ***Social History from the Text Book of Poetics in The Sangam Age*** (A Study of Tolkappiyam – Section IV. Porulatikaram), Proceedings of Indian History Congress, Calcutta, 1990, p.96.

He wonders about the cow protectors becoming cow sacrificers and eaters. He comments: “The cow protectors of Prof. Subramaniam appear in fierce light as cow sacrificers and cow eaters in another song in the same collection”.

He again accuses him for interpreting vetchi as the opening in war, meant for protecting the valuable life of the cows which could not protect themselves. “However, the present writer found a group of poems in Purananuru which gave an entirely different picture, singing the praise of the warrior chiefs who would go to neighboring villages, plunder the cattle and make a grand feat with meat and drink or distribute them in gifts to their followers. These poems received the true nature of the tribal practice”.

But, he is totally wrong as the reference is found in Agananuru and not in Purananuru. Moreover, the so called warriors are “Mazhavar” who are in the habit of committing heinous crimes including killing the travelers as pointed out above.

C. E. Ramachandran, ***Ahananuru in its Historical Setting***, University of Madras, Madras, 1974, pp.72-74.

Though, references about beef-eating are available in Agananuru, he is conspicuously silent about it in his work, while discussing about food habits of the ancient Tamils.

F. R. Allchin, ***Neolithic Cattle Keepers of South India***, Cambridge University Press, London, 1963.

He records that the bones recovered almost all from living areas were mostly cut up as if purposes of food (p.174). though over 200 specimen of cattle bones were identified, he opines that it is not clear whether this indicates the presence of two separate breeds one milch variety and the other used for transport and ploughing purposes (p.45). in introduction, he

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mentions about the western attitude towards cows, cowdung, cow worship, gosalas etc., (pp.ix-x).

5. Un Puram.14.13; 96.6; 381:1-3; 382:8
Thu Padit.51:33.
Dhasai Puram.14:12-16, 64:3-4; 74:1-2; 168:6-10; 235:6-7; 396:15-16;
Pernatru. 336, 343-345,
Malai. 175-177, 422-426, 563-566.
Agam.60:3-6; 193:6-10; 265:12-17;
Nat.120:5-6.
Kali.104:52-53.
Pari.4:19-21.
Ninam Puram.150.9; 152.26; 325:9; 396:12.
Vidakkudai Natri.281.6.
Muri Puram. 391:5.
6. Agam. 334:1-3; Puram. 288: 1-4; Madurai.732-733.
7. Nat. 252:2-3.
Kurun.77:2-3
Agam.113:18; 161:2-4; 175:1-6; 313: 12-132.
8. S. Gurumurthy, ***Archaeology and Tamil Culture***, University of Madras, Madras, 1974, p.25.
He asserts that megalithic people were living during the Sangam period and it can be put within 1000 to 500 BCE and the Sangam literature shows their cultural traits.
9. Puram.9:1-2; 34:1.
10. Tirukkural.110, 560.
11. A. Ghose (Ed.), *An Encyclopedia of Indian Archaeology*, 2 vols., Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1989.
K. S. Ramaschandran, ***Neolithic Cultures of India***, Department of Archaeology, Madras, 1980.
B. K. Gururaja Rao, ***The Megalithic Culture in South India***, University of Mysore, Mysore, 1982.
S. B. Deo, ***Problem of South Indian Megaliths***, Karnatak University, Dharwar, 1974.